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TERRY BRANSTAD, GOVERNOR
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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
JASON E. GLASS, DIRECTOR

July 12, 2011

Superintendent Nancy Sebring
901 Walnut Street
Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Superintendent Sebring:

Attached is the report of findings for the Des Moines Public Charter School located at 620 Eighth Street, Des Moines. The Des Moines District's Charter School site visits were conducted on November 5, 2010, April 7, 2011, and May 31, 2011. The visiting team extends its gratitude to the Des Moines Public Charter School staff in preparing for and showing courtesy during the visits. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

The Iowa Department of Education conducts visits to charter schools in accordance with Iowa Code 281—68.5 which reads as follows:

A charter school shall be reviewed periodically by the department to ensure continuing compliance with the charter school's contract. The department may schedule mandatory meetings with the administrators of all charter schools at the department's sole discretion.

The report is based upon interviews conducted with charter school staff and a review of documents submitted during the visits.

The site visit was designed to assess the school's progress with its goals and objectives as set out by the charter application, provide a general assessment of educational practices within the school, make recommendations for improvement, and determine compliance with State accreditation standards and applicable federal program requirements.

As a result of the visits, the Department observes that the Des Moines Public Charter School is in the early stages of development. It is making positive progress towards each of its goals and objectives and is making a consistent effort to align its actions with the goals and objectives of the charter.

It is our hope that this report will provide guidance to enhance student achievement in the school and support continuing conversations among staff and

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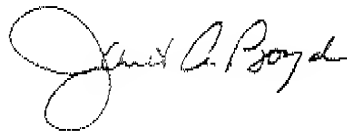
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community members about the Des Moines Public Charter School, how and what students are learning, and how *more* students can learn at higher levels.

If you have any additional questions regarding the process, or need technical assistance regarding school processes, please feel free to contact us at the number or e-mail address provided below.

Sincerely,



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Iowa Department of Education Official File

Des Moines Charter School Report Iowa Department of Education



Des Moines Independent Public School District

**Team Findings
November 5, 2010
April 7, 2011
May 31, 2011**

Iowa Department of Education
Grimes State Office Building
400 E. 14th Street
Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0146

Introduction:

The Des Moines Independent Community School District (DMPS) submitted an application for a public charter school December 15, 2009. The Des Moines Public Charter School (DMPCS) was approved by the State Board of Education in April 2010. The Des Moines Public Charter School opened January 2011 for seventh and eighth grade students.

The original charter application states: "The Des Moines Public Charter School will meet the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs of young men and women of great potential who have struggled to find success in the traditional middle school setting and are at-risk of dropping out of school." Although the school focuses on the specific needs of at-risk students, it is not limited to one demographic. According to page two of the charter application, the school is open to "all Des Moines Public School middle school students."

The school is currently located at 620-8th Street, sharing the facility with Orchard Place PACE Program. During the Des Moines Public Charter School's first year, the Iowa Department of Education (IDOE) conducted three visits occurring on the following dates:

- November 5, 2010 – pre opening
- April 7, 2011
- May 31, 2011

DES MOINES CHARTER SCHOOL GOALS

GOAL 1: *(Reading) Students will demonstrate growth as readers [Students will be assessed] using norm-referenced standardized assessments, criterion-referenced teacher-created assessments, and diagnostic probes and inventories.*

Findings: The Des Moines Public Charter School is using a variety of assessments for reading. Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Analytical Reading Inventory (ARI) are two examples of assessments used to provide data on student growth as readers. DMPCS is continuously looking at student achievement data and adjusting programming to meet student needs. For example, DMPCS looked at reading scores and developed a new reading class.

Recommendations: None noted at this time.

GOAL 2: *(Mathematics) Students will demonstrate growth as mathematicians [Students will be assessed] using norm-referenced standardized assessments,*

criterion-referenced teacher-created assessments, and diagnostic probes and inventories.

Findings: The mathematics classroom is using Skills Tutor, an online math program, as a method of formative assessment. In addition, the school participates in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

DMPCS has recruited a retired math teacher to provide additional student support.

Recommendations: None noted at this time.

GOAL 3: *(Science) Students will demonstrate growth as scientific thinkers [Students will be assessed] using norm-referenced standardized assessments and criterion-referenced teacher-created assessments.*

Findings: DMPCS uses the ITBS and formative assessments at the classroom level to assess student progress in science. Science topics are the anchor for student projects requiring cross-curricular efforts and knowledge.

Recommendations: DMPCS might consider new and innovative ways to afford students more authentic hands-on science experiences and learning. Current facilities are not conducive to hands-on experimentation. The school may want to look outside the school building to the community to foster these types of experiences. For example, the school could benefit from developing a relationship with the Science Center of Iowa or Des Moines University. Additionally, such relationships would align with the school's goal of community engagement.

GOAL 4: *(Social Studies) Students will demonstrate growth in their understanding of the world [Students will be assessed] using norm-referenced standardized assessments and criterion-referenced teacher-created assessments.*

Findings: Currently the social studies portion of the ITBS is given. Although formative assessment occurs in the social studies class, the social studies curriculum is also incorporated into the other classes such as the "Big Picture" class.

Recommendations: None noted at this time.

GOAL 5: *(Arts) Students will demonstrate growth in their understanding of the value of fine and applied arts [Students will be assessed] using teacher-created assessments, peer reviews, and student self-reflections.*

Findings: Goal 5 has the potential to be measured within performance-based projects done at the school such as portfolios, presentations, and media presentations.

Recommendations: DMPCS might consider working closely with the downtown community and with DMPS to provide fine and applied arts experiences. For example, the Des Moines community is home to the award-winning design studio of Sticks, Inc., and many other local artisans and musicians.

GOAL 6: *(Health-Wellness) Students will demonstrate growth in their understanding of the attributes of physical and mental well-being [Students will be assessed] using teacher-created assessments and student self-reflections. Growth for all students would be indicated through the percent of students working at the mastery level on teacher-created performance assessments and self-reflections of monitored results of personal health goals.*

Findings: The physical education (PE) program was added after DMPCS opened and has experienced staff turnover. The school has hired a new PE teacher who has experience with at-risk youth. The school is in the process of infusing health and wellness in the PE program.

Recommendations: Developing a physical education program that truly incorporates health and wellness which is documented and systemic would be worth consideration. A well-documented program with processes and procedures would provide the school with stability should the school experience additional staff turnover.

DES MOINES CHARTER SCHOOL OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: *Implement a high-quality educational program that is aligned with the rigorous academic standards in the Iowa Core Curriculum and Des Moines Public Schools Ends in the areas of literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, and health/wellness as measured by ITBS/ITED, criterion-referenced tests, performance-based assessments, and students earning sufficient credits in grades 9 through 12 needed to be on track for graduation.*

Findings: DMPCS is making progress in implementation of the Iowa Core and utilizing the District's "Ends." Ends are district-developed student

outcomes. The Iowa Core and District Ends are being addressed by assessment-driven curriculum and lessons that meet the student's needs.

DMPCS focuses on writing across the curriculum.

There appears to be a lack of documented procedures for special programs which address English Language Learners (ELL) and Talented and Gifted (TAG).

Recommendations: While the desire to "implement a high-quality educational program" appears to be an overarching theme at DMPCS, the school does not have a formal vision or mission statement. The school might consider developing a vision and mission statement with stakeholder input.

The school is encouraged to continue its alignment efforts with regards to the Iowa Core and the Des Moines Public School Ends. For assistance with Iowa Core alignment, contact Rita Martens, IDOE, at Rita.Martens@iowa.gov

The school is encouraged to document its procedures for serving students identified as ELL or TAG.

Objective 2: *Ensure that all students meet or exceed the standards of the Iowa Core Curriculum and develop 21st century skills through the implementation of a variety of research-based student-centered instructional strategies as measured by student assessments, ITBS/ITED, teacher observation, student feedback, and parent feedback.*

Findings: The school is a 1-to-1 laptop school where every student is assigned a net book. The school does not use textbooks and relies on online content.

The charter application states the Des Moines Public Charter School will embed the 21st century skills (survival skills) addressed in the book, *The Global Achievement Gap; Why Even our Best Schools Don't Teach The New Survival Skills Our Children Need – and What We Can Do About It*, by Tony Wagner. Examples of (survival) skills such as innovation or adaptability do not have a specific measurement instrument.

The "Big Picture Class" requires students to pick a topic and design a multi-faceted project which incorporates several curricular areas and their creative skills. For example, students did a tri-fold project in the "Big Picture Class." These tri-fold projects were displayed at parent-teacher

conferences, and students were available to explain their projects much like a science fair-type format. Numerous skills are built through these authentic assignments. Examples include speaking, critical thinking, interpersonal relationships, and organizational skills. In addition, the school uses a competency based model to accommodate both 7th and 8th grade students together in one classroom.

Recommendations: The director has plans to refine the 1-to-1 laptop initiative at the school. The staff has visited other local districts to gain ideas to develop technology use. The school does not have a well-defined technology plan or professional development to help teachers and students use the laptops to improve learning. The school is encouraged to revisit their goals for the 1-to-1 initiative paying attention to the following principles:

- Training for both students and staff
- Training that provides engagement and interaction
- Implementing the technology
- Ensuring technology is in the hands of enthusiastic staff members
- Providing peer support
- Profiling successful use with both peers and community

In addition, Intel® Education *thinking tools* training might also provide ideas for technology integration. For information regarding Intel® Education *thinking tools* training, contact Sandra Dop, Teaching and Learning Consultant, IDOE, at Sandra.Dop@iowa.gov

Objective 3: *Utilize multiple forms of assessment to inform instruction, to monitor student progress towards learning goals, and to document success in meeting state standards as measured by student achievement data, authentic assessments, ITBS/ITED results, and teacher observation.*

Findings: DMPCS uses multiple assessments including, but not limited to, the ITBS and Analytical Reading Inventory (ARI). Each teacher utilizes formative assessments and criterion-referenced tests in individual classrooms. The multi-age classrooms exemplify the importance of assessing student skills so that instruction can be tailored to each student's needs.

Recommendations: The collection of data to focus on students displaying charter school early warning signs is in the beginning phases. The school might consider ways to use district-wide data to focus efforts on students who could benefit from the charter school program.

The three early warning indicators (outlined in the charter application) include:

- excessive absences
- three or more course failures
- ITBS scores below the 41st percentile.

Currently 59 percent of all middle school students are below the 41st percentile.

DMPCS is encouraged to continue its efforts to improve data collection and analysis to increase individual student achievement.

Objective 4: *Increase student engagement with the school and facilitate social/emotional development through personalized goal-setting, advocacy, and mentoring as measured by progress towards goals, attendance, positive behavior, student feedback, and parent feedback.*

Findings: The student Personal Learning Plan (PLP) is a part of each student's ten year plan. The school's first semester advisory curriculum is being evaluated by staff and additional activities and curriculum are being developed for future use. The research base for the advisory curriculum is *Power2Achieve*™ and "Big Picture." The *Power2Achieve*™ for Schools programming provides curricular materials and professional development designed to help schools enhance teaching and learning. In addition, the school focuses on writing across the curriculum.

Recommendations: None noted at this time.

Objective 5: *Provide a network of continuous monitoring, early intervention, and support for students to assist them in overcoming barriers to school success as measured by attendance, student assessment data, number of students being served, types of services, student feedback, and parent feedback.*

Findings: DMPCS is continuously looking at student achievement data and adjusting programming to meet student needs. For example, the school looked at reading scores and developed a new reading class. It looked at discipline data and adjusted supervision schedules.

DMPCS appears to be small enough to provide personalized learning environments for students and to meet individual needs.

The Des Moines Public Charter School has a number of factors assisting students in overcoming barriers to school success. For example, the school administrator reported that some parents wish to have their child

attend the smaller school to prevent bullying which was occurring in their home schools. The small size is a positive because it provides more personalization. Other examples included the following:

- The longer school day
- Uniforms
- Mandatory parent involvement
- Contact with parents
- Calendar (200 days)
- More educational opportunities beyond the classroom door
- Free Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority (DART) passes
- After-school clubs

Recommendations: DMPCS has indicated no formal intervention model exists such as a Response to Intervention (RTI) team or Building Assistance Teams. The school may want to consider a more formal intervention model. For assistance regarding the RTI process, contact Eric Neessen, Iowa Department of Education, at Eric.Neessen@iowa.gov or read about RTI in Iowa at: <http://www.edweek.org/tsb/articles/2008/09/10/01rti.h02.html>

Objective 6: *The Des Moines Charter School will function as an autonomous school, governed by an advisory council, and the principles outlined in the Charter granted by the Des Moines Independent Community School District and the Iowa Department of Education which ensures that all students learn at high levels and meet/exceed state standards as measured by multiple student assessments and ITBS/ITED scores.*

Findings: The advisory council is still in the developmental stages. A consultant has been hired to lead the advisory council. Once the council is in place it will consist of two parents, one community member, and two individuals picked by the superintendent. The newly hired facilitator will work with the advisory council.

Recommendations: It is important for DMPCS to proceed with the advisory council. In the charter application, the timeline for establishing the council was two months after opening the school. As of the last IDOE visit on May 31, 2011, the council was still not in place. The advisory council must be an integrated part of the school's operation. The following functions should be accomplished by the council per the original charter application:

- Evaluation of the Director
- Collects stakeholder feedback
- Monitor student achievement

- Strategic planning
- Fiscal management
- Accountability to parents and public

Objective 7: *The advisory council will ensure that the educational program will take place in a safe and secure facility and is supported with the necessary infrastructure of support services.*

Findings: Although the advisory council is still in the developmental stages, the original planning committee has assisted school start-up. The original charter school facility was located at 620 - 8th Street. This location turned out to be less than ideal for the school as it was unable to accommodate the addition of Grades 9-12. The school, currently located at 620 - 8th Street will be temporarily moved to district facilities on Walker Street next to East High School, while a more permanent, appropriate facility in the downtown area is being renovated.

Recommendations: DMPCS may want to consider ways to continue monitoring students' perceptions of a safe learning environment. As the school continues to add high school grade levels, additional stresses are added to the system. For assistance, contact Cyndy Erickson, Safe Schools Consultant, IDOE, at Cyndy.Erickson@iowa.gov

Objective 8: *Parents/families will be equal partners in their student's educational program and actively involved in school programming decisions as measured by Ten-Year Plans, advisory board meeting minutes, and parent/family feedback.*

Findings: DMPCS is using numerous methods to communicate with its stakeholders. Examples included:

- Infinite Campus
- Every School/Every Thursday in the Des Moines Register
- E-mail
- Newsletter (in progress)
- Monthly parent meeting
- Website (in progress)

The school has a plan to improve the website. As a part of the parental involvement component, parents with website expertise have volunteered to work on the project. Currently, the school website only consists of the class schedule. The site can be viewed at:
<http://www.dmps.k12.ia.us/Schools/SchoolWebSites/DesMoinesPublicCharterSchool.aspx>

DMPCS is in the process of creating a handbook for the advisory council. In addition, handbooks are being developed for numerous audiences. (i.e., student, volunteer, parent).

The school requires parent involvement, but does allow flexibility regarding how families contribute their time. For example, in one family the parents worked long hours and the school allowed an older sibling to tutor for the required parental involvement.

I Have a Plan Iowa (IHAPI) is completed in the 21st Century class and is the basis for the ten-year plan. The ten-year plan begins with Grade 7 and is inclusive of four years of college.

Recommendations: The school is in the process of further developing its website. The school might consider alternative ways to communicate with families who do not have access to the internet.

Objective 9: *The Des Moines Charter School will employ a diverse, high-quality faculty to create a caring community of learners that supports the success of all students as measured by staff qualifications, resumes, career development plans, student assessment data, as well as student and parental feedback.*

Findings: The staff works together to craft solutions to issues facing the school. For example, the schedule was set up for the students to receive art and physical education instruction every Wednesday afternoon when staff attended professional development. This schedule did not work as there were numerous behavior issues and teachers assigned to Wednesday specials were unable to deal with them. The arrangement was not meeting the needs of the students. The staff is working on a different schedule to better accommodate student learning needs and staff requirements. In addition, charter staff is collaborating with local businesses and institutions to do concentrated instruction. The school is also planning a Leadership Council for next school year which will go through the charter application. This council will participate in leadership training at Drake University.

The use of differentiated instruction is monitored by the use of teacher lesson plans. Modified lesson plans include instructional strategies for differentiation. The leadership stated the school emphasizes "good lessons that challenge everyone" and the importance of staff getting to know the students. The expectation is that challenging and personalized education should be evident in every classroom.

DMPCS administration and staff are using Teacher Quality funds to visit other charter schools. The staff plans to visit charter schools in Chicago and High Tech High in San Diego, California.

Recommendations: The Career Development plan and *360 Degree Feedback* evaluation are still in the planning stages. *360 Degree Feedback* is a system or process in which employees receive confidential, anonymous feedback from the people who work around them. The school is involved with a program called *Power2Achieve™* which has an evaluative component.

Objective 10: *The Des Moines Charter School will protect the physical and emotional safety of all students through a culture of high expectations, cultural responsiveness, positive behavior, and supportive relationships as measured by discipline referrals, student feedback, staff observation, parent feedback, and student assessment data.*

Findings: DMPCS has put into place positive behavior incentives. For example, students who are showing academic improvement or good citizenship are rewarded by being taken out to lunch. Numerous surveys will assist in monitoring feedback regarding the schools "cultural responsiveness."

Recommendations: At the time of the last site visit, the school had not developed a consistent and reliable method to track behavior referrals. For example, the staff reported they were unable to keep up with record-keeping on Infinite Campus, the DMPS district student management system. Infinite Campus is available to the school; however it is not being used to its full potential at the school. The school may want to consider receiving further training in the use of Infinite Campus in order to track behavior trends.

Objective 11: *Build community support for the Charter School as measured by number of mentors, volunteers, sites for internships, and community-based learning, services for students and families, and annual applications of new students.*

Findings: Numerous surveys, focus groups, parent feedback, and discipline data will assist in monitoring culture and climate. DMPCS has enjoyed strong community support, including many donations through the Des Moines Public Charter School Foundation. In addition, the school was awarded a Leadership Circle Grant. The school has developed a status report regarding the current state of the school, including demographics and the documentation of numerous financial contributions of the community.

Recommendations: The school is continuing a strong community relationship; the school may want to consider purposeful ways to develop community learning opportunities with a focus on increased business partnerships for internships as the school adds high school grades.

Summary:

The Des Moines Public Charter School is able to provide services that could not otherwise be delivered in a traditional middle school since the staff can respond more quickly and is more agile in providing needed services. The small size allows the school to be more responsive to individual student needs. The school provides a personalized learning environment. For example, one student needed to attend the academy at central campus. The school got the student in quickly due to the ability to cut through the layers of bureaucracy. Other examples of the agility of the school includes the change in schedule after spring break, adding reading and physical education courses for every student, and adapting the schedule to meet supervisory needs.

The Des Moines Public Charter School provides parents with a choice. The school has created an option for addressing specific student needs and personalizing education for the individual student. Communication started with parent meetings at the middle schools and grew into fifteen (15) minute informational meetings with students.

The processes for informing the DMPS community regarding the benefits of attending the Des Moines Public Charter School are in the development stages. The school is collecting assessment data on current students to be responsive to academic needs. The school is also working with the district to begin the process of collecting data necessary for further communication efforts.